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Between Leadership and Leadership Aversion - Improving the EU's Foreign Policy

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Jan Techau¹

1. The mental framework: The Leadership Aversion Theory of European Politics

Asking for the improvement of the EU's foreign policy is asking Kissinger's phone number question over and over again. The phone number question is essentially a leadership question. And all the institutional reform efforts we have been observing ever since the commencement of the Constitutional Convention's work in February 2002, including the infamous "reflection period" after the failed referenda in France and the Netherlands in 2005, have basically been mostly that: a leadership debate. While talking institutions, the EU is in fact trying to figure out leadership as its core political problem: how to enable leadership in Europe, how to channel it, how to curb it, how to make it effective and participatory at the same time. The difficulty stems, of course, from the fact that generating compromise among as many as 27 member states is endlessly more difficult than doing the same thing with fewer states at the table. The underlying reason for this difficulty, however, is less technical. It's historical and cultural and therefore much harder to alleviate.

In its essence, the very idea of strong leadership as a political principle among European nation states is against all historical instincts of a continent that traditionally was and is much more at ease with balance of power politics. The continent has learned the lesson that, when in the history of modern Europe, strong leadership emerged from within continental Europe,

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this leadership has, more often than not, proven disastrous for the continent. The catastrophic experiences of the 30-years war, Napoleon's aggressive reign, the World Wars I and II have taught the continent two things: (1) to rigorously balance out the urges and the ambitions of its major powers, and (2) to import leadership from the outside instead of generating it from within Europe. I call this the "Leadership Aversion Theory of European Politics".

For a long period, Britain served as the required outside balancer, providing the necessary leadership to preserve the precarious stability on the continent. When Britain was reduced to a small power after World War II, Europe looked for an alternative source for the direly needed import. At the same time, the United States decided to finally become a European power. By means of NATO, the Marshall Plan and by supporting the early steps of European integration, the U.S. served as the guarantor of stability, the provider of security and the purveyor of leadership for continental Europe – up to this day.

But while being protected and led by an outside power, the Europeans did not sit around idly. In order to deal with their own inner workings, they created an intricate power-sharing and leadership-avoiding system called the EU, complete with interlocking institutions and no single European country in the driver's seat.² This system's institutions either received in-built weakeners, such as national vetoes in the Council, or they were given relatively confined and clearly defined portfolios (such as the Commission and The European Court of Justice). Matters of security and defense were excluded from this program.

² see Renaud Dehousse and Florence Deloche-Gaudez: *Is there anyone in charge? Leadership in EU Constitutional Negotiations*, in: Derek Beach and Colette Mazzucelli (ed.): *Leadership in the Big bangs of European Integration*, New York 2007, p.219-226. "Moreover, European integration has deliberately been conceived as an anti-hegemonic process, in which no country should be able to exert decisive influence on its own", p.225.

This division of labour worked and served the interests of all those involved very well. Then the end of the cold war and its extremely stimulating effect on globalising forces fundamentally changed the political set-up. Leadership import from the U.S. was much less a given now. Europeans, gradually, had to learn to guarantee stability, peace and prosperity themselves, at least to a much higher degree than before. When so challenged, in order to make the EU more politically apt, they followed their well-developed instincts of power-sharing and inward balancing. The results were the Maastricht Treaty and its follow-up treaties of Amsterdam and Nice. In Maastricht, for the first time, Europe really attempted to square the circle: to allow for stronger European political leadership while at the same time upholding the intricate interlocking power-sharing principle. But as the entire idea of self-generated European leadership goes against the instincts of Europe, these treaty compromises all look awfully just like that: compromise. The strongest advocate for limited European leadership and for the upholding of the balance-of-power system is the traditional European balancer, the United Kingdom, now itself an EU partner. As the UK is not in the position to single-handedly impose its political will on the continent, it follows a dual-track strategy: keeping the relatively weak political construction of the EU as weak as possible while at the same time strongly advocating external leadership import from the U.S..

This post-cold-war order was functional as long as Europe could keep itself busy with expansion, the monetary union, the constitution, etc., i.e. with looking inwardly, regulating internal affairs, balancing and stabilizing an ever-growing club of nations. This period is now coming to an end. In a globalised world, much more is asked of the EU than mere navel-gazing. It is now common wisdom that Europe “must do more” to deal with conflicts around the world and the threats and challenges imposed by terrorism, poverty, ethnic strife, demographic development, human rights violations, trade imbalances, etc.

Today, with 27 member states on board, for Europe to punch its weight in world affairs, it must unite and act as one. For this it needs leadership. But who is going to provide it? What kind of collective construction (because collective it must be) could create the momentum to pull the 27 into one direction? How do you create institutions that allow for leadership while at the same time do not infringe the historic power-sharing compromise that has guaranteed peace and prosperity in Europe in the last half century? This is precisely the question at the centre of all the debate we currently observe. The historical background makes it easier to understand why the current constitutional debate is so fierce. It explains why the current debate is not just a technical quarrel about Qualified Majority Voting (QMV), symbols of statehood, and stronger institutions but a European soul-search. On the basis of this, let's inquire into what to expect from the upcoming treaty negotiations.

2. What will be the likely results of the upcoming EU treaty compromise?

The provisions concerning the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) written into the original draft constitution were among the least controversial parts of the entire document.³ Primarily, this was due to the fact that these provisions did not substantially change the inter-governmental method with its system of divided leadership and balanced decision-making.⁴ Despite some hefty-looking institutional innovations, such as the proposed Foreign Minister, the fundamental principle of state sovereignty, i.e. national vetoes on all matters CFSP, remains untouched. If one is to believe the information leaking from the current negotiations, these provisions will most likely go into the new treaty compromise largely unchanged.

³ for the original English version of the draft, check http://en.euabc.com/upload/rfConstitution_en.pdf

⁴ see Franco Algieri: *Von der Macht der Zeitumstände und der Fortführung eines internationalen Projekts: Die Gemeinsame Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik im Verfassungsvertrag*, in: Werner Weidenfeld (ed.): *Die Europäische Verfassung in der Analyse*, Gütersloh 2005, pp. 205-227. „Grundsätzlich ist jedoch zu erkennen, dass deren intergouvernementaler Charakter und damit einhergehend die dominierende Rolle der Mitgliedsstaaten im Wesentlichen erhalten bleiben“, p.216.

The new treaty will most likely establish three new institutions:

- a. A permanent Presidency of the European Union, i.e. a permanent chairmanship of the European Council, elected by qualified majority vote by the council. This creation will replace the largely inefficient and (to the outside world) rather confusing system of rotating six-months presidencies, shared equally among the 27 EU member states. The permanent presidency will
 - i. chair the meetings of the European Council,
 - ii. coordinate the European Council's work,
 - iii. be the highest formal external representative of the EU
 - iv. try to streamline the European Council's effectiveness as the EU's primary legislative entity
 - v. hold office for two and a half years (renewable once)
 - vi. not hold any other national office

The focus of the intended reform is clearly mostly managerial, not content-oriented.

The permanent presidency will hold few hard powers. This is in stark contrast to the situation now, where the (still increasing) power of the presidency emerges from the combination of national leadership with the hugely important power to dictate the Council's agenda and to take the initiative on whatever policy is deemed important.⁵

Whether this change will have any positive impact on policy, especially the EU's foreign policy, is doubtful.

- b. The second innovation will be the EU Foreign Minister, albeit under another title.⁶

The Foreign Minister will be a very specific and typically European construction. He or she will be wearing two hats simultaneously, (a) the chairmanship of the Foreign

⁵ For an insightful analysis of the crucial powers of the EU presidency, see the contributions of Jonas Tallberg, Colette Mazzucelli, and Ben Crum in: Derek Beach and Colette Mazzucelli (ed.): *Leadership in the Big bangs of European Integration*, New York 2007.

⁶ Countries such as the United Kingdom, Poland and the Czech Republic reject any kind of wording that might indicate a potential "statehood" of the EU. Therefore symbols and names that could be interpreted this way will not appear in the new treaty. For lack of a better term, this paper will use the term "Foreign Minister".

Affairs council of the EU and (b) the office of vice president of the European Commission. This dual capacity is the attempt to institutionalize better coordination between the council as the organ of the 27 member states, and the Commission with its vast independent administrative and technical expertise. According to the draft treaty's Article I-28,

the Union Minister for Foreign Affairs shall conduct the Union's common foreign and security policy. He or she shall contribute by his or her proposals to the development of that policy, which he or she shall carry out as mandated by the Council. The same shall apply to the common security and defence policy.

This makes the Minister (who is elected and removed by QMV in the Council) the member states' executive arm but only if explicitly authorized. Thus, he or she will at best be a facilitator and enabler but not a leader. This construction would only be a slight improvement of the current situation and might therefore be called "Solana 2.0". The meaning and the importance of this new position seems to be mostly dependent on the chosen candidate's personal competence, stamina, charm, and cunning. Potentially, the minister could have considerable influence over the Council's agenda, and could streamline its decision-making process. At this, he or she could profit from being a Commissioner, which, in itself, is a potential power base, but certainly not a guaranteed source of influence. Most importantly, he or she will simply not be able to force member towards a common position. They, and they alone, remain in charge. The only real meaningful novelty here is that instead of the troika formed by the Presidency, the High Representative and the Foreign Affairs Commissioner, the EU will be represented to the outside world by one person alone. To what extent the dual-hat portfolio will create a dynamic leading to real influence in, or to a more cohesive nature of the EU's foreign policy decision making process remains to be seen. The selection of an apt candidate seems to be crucial. Given past experience with the

Commission President, it seems likely that the member states will be tempted to choose a relatively weak candidate in order to keep things under control. On top of this, it remains unclear how the Foreign Minister and the newly established President of the European Council organize a sensible division of labour. Potentially, they could well be rivals, thereby creating less cohesiveness and less effectiveness instead of more.

- c. The third innovation will probably be the External Action Service (EAS) of the EU, i.e. a quasi Foreign Service, complete with diplomatic status and direct accountability to the Foreign Minister. In the upcoming new treaty, the design of this new instrument might differ considerably from how it was supposed to be in the original draft treaty. The original design drew heavy flak from anti-statehood activists, and its substance seems to be part of the current negotiations. Originally, the EAS was supposed to be staffed by civil servants from the EU Council and by delegates of national diplomatic services. Fears in Brussels are that the EAS will not receive the desired degree of independence from nation states, thus making it a potential playground for national meddling and infighting. Although a new treaty is far from being adopted, the EU has already started setting up the service.

These institutional changes are not being accompanied by any substantial procedural change concerning CFSP. Nowhere in this field have any relevant competences been assigned to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV). This, more than anything else, indicates that member states were not willing to shift any foreign policy competence from the national level to the supra-national level.

Summing up, it is clear that foreign policy remains the domain of national sovereignty. For many this will undoubtedly be good news, as it will keep the EU from slowly and clandestinely turning into a federal super state. For others, this will be bad news, as it will perpetuate the status of the EU as something that's less than the sum of its parts, being utterly dependent on the willingness of nation states to each time slowly create a unified will in order to act as one. For some this is the outcome of a healthy kind of realism, for others it means keeping the EU a foreign policy dwarf.

3. What will be the likely foreign policy results?

The most likely result of the expected institutional changes will be a continuation of the case-by-case foreign policy we have so far been observing. This means that, on occasion, the 27 member states will be able to create a unified approach to a foreign policy problem (as in the case of a unified stand on the Iranian nuclear program, the peace-keeping missions in the Congo and Macedonia), but mostly this will not be the case (as with the great division over the Iraq war and the Russian energy strategy). There might be a slight chance that in cases where the EU does indeed want to act as one, a strong Foreign Minister will enable the EU to implement policies quicker. But this will in any case only be possible after the member states have made up their minds. All the classic and decisive decision-making steps need to be taken by member states first: the identification and acknowledgement of a problem, the unified assessment of its importance, the definition of a shared interest and the mustering of a unified will to act. In some of this, the Foreign Minister might actually be rather helpful. But essentially, member states are on their own to take these steps, and they might even be tempted to circumvent the EU entirely. European Foreign policy is and will remain the creation of member states that have decided to employ the European Union as a means to their end. It is not an end in itself.

This leads to the question how the necessary consensus in those cases can be created. Which, in turn, brings us back to the question of leadership. Traditionally, in foreign policy, the EU has been able to act in a unified way whenever its three major powers, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, could agree to do so (in some instances the Franco-German tandem was sufficient). Says Ulrich Speck, author of Kosmoblog, the German weekly's *Die Zeit* foreign policy blog⁷:

"It's no accident that they formed the EU-3 in order to negotiate with Tehran – bypassing Brussels (...) European action can only come from the European actors and these are mainly the big three."

In this, the EU has not changed significantly from the times when it was a small six-member club. Leadership matters and only the big states can deliver it. More importantly, this leadership necessarily must be collective leadership. No single state will be allowed to exercise leadership alone for a prolonged period of time. Only this way, the delicate and basic compromise in the EU (as formulated above in the leadership aversion theory) and thus the inner peace of the EU can be maintained. The tediousness of its foreign policy decision-making process and the slowness of its reactions abroad are the price for peace at home.

But even with leadership being exercised by the big three, compromise is harder to reach within the EU-27 than within the EU-15 or the EU-6. Therefore, it seems to be unavoidable that unified EU action is getting rarer and rarer. At the same time, the sheer necessity to act as one in an ever-more complicated, globalised world might be able to create just the kind of outside pressure the EU has always been very good at reacting to. With fresh political personnel being in place in the big-three countries, the chances for leadership might be greater now than at any point in the last few years.

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<http://blog.zeit.de/kosmoblog/>

4. Will the changes enable the EU to play a global role while allowing for further enlargement?

The capacity of the EU to play a global role will with some certainty not be greatly enhanced by the expected new treaty.⁸ The EU will remain being a trade power house of global status, it will remain being the foremost provider of foreign aid, and it will remain being a net-exporter of stability by executing accession talks and by implementing the European Neighbourhood Policy. It will not, however, turn into a singular foreign policy entity capable of projecting military power globally. It will not be able to muster its potential muscle as a guarantor of global stability and order.

Concerning enlargement, the situation is less clear. On the one hand, the probable compromise on institutional change will surely not be sufficient to get rid of the institutional gridlock currently stifling the EU decision-making system. However, tackling this problem is widely seen as the precondition for further enlargement. Technically speaking, the answer to the above question should therefore be no. On the other hand, the news of a compromise found could create pressure on Brussels to again become more pro-active in enlargement. European leaders themselves have created conditionality between internal reform and enlargement. However, they have never defined the qualitative level of reform necessary to improve the EU's "absorption capacity". This lack of clarity could very well backfire as soon as some kind of compromise is found on the constitutional treaty. European leaders clearly need to define very precisely the exact conditions to be met by the EU itself for any kind of further enlargement. They also need to be frank about how far expansion might go in the future and about possible alternative models for stability export. Otherwise they might find themselves in very awkward negotiation positions, with the result that the EU's capacity to

⁸ With considerable panache, the EU Security Strategy *A Secure Europe in a better World*, published in December 2003, the EU claims to already be the global player it still aspires to be. See <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>

exert a stabilizing, liberalizing and pacifying influence over its immediate surrounding could wane. This would be a severe shortcoming, if not a downright catastrophe. For it is enlargement and its great effect on Eastern Europe that is the biggest success story of European foreign policy – and one of the biggest success stories of Western soft power ever.

5. How will the U.S. be affected?

If the Foreign Minister were to be created, the EU would finally have that famous phone number. It was sometimes claimed that this was already the case with Javier Solana being the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. But that was only partly true, because with the presidency and the External relations commissioner also being part of the game, it was at best down to three phone numbers. This would be over. The one magic number would be established, albeit with a serious shortcoming: you shouldn't expect a clear and quick answer every time you are calling. The one person answering the call would after all be the Foreign Minister, a servant of the member states. In urgent cases, the President of the United States could still be tempted to call Berlin, Paris, and London directly.

The U.S. would therefore not be forced to alter its conventional and tested way of dealing with the EU: deal with member states (possibly the big three) directly when in need of some quick reply, deal with the Foreign Minister when a cohesive EU position has already been established.

Furthermore, the fact that for the foreseeable future the EU will be nothing more than a conglomerate of 27 sovereign nation states will enable the U.S. to continue to play these nations against each other whenever it deems this appropriate or useful. This is being attempted regularly and relatively openly (with Iraq being only one of many examples). This remains a nuisance to the Europeans but it is mostly their own weakness that's inviting it.

If the U.S. wanted to do the EU a favour, the best thing she could do was keeping the pressure on. Keep on asking the tough questions, i.e. keep on demanding concrete policy suggestions instead of mere criticism. Can Europe provide an alternative? Can it provide useful insight and knowledge? Can it exercise leverage and chip in useful capacities? The U.S. should be prepared, however, to ask for this only if she were willing to make the Europeans real stakeholders in her own policy. Europe will be willing to accept American leadership as long as it will be taken serious, even though it might sometimes be weak. As this would keep the best thinkable ally a friend, it would not only be kind, it would also be wise American diplomacy.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the proposed reforms for a new European treaty will not bring about the unified and strong actor many wish for. Leadership aversion will once more have its way. For Europeans the message is: the next round of reform talks is just around the corner. Try harder next time, especially in the field of foreign policy. While we do not need a strongly integrated Europe in all policy fields, we certainly need it in foreign policy.

For Americans, the message is: when it comes to foreign policy, Europe will, for the time being, not be a fellow leader or even a competitor to the U.S.. The EU will be a partner at best. But it will also be the best partner the U.S. can get. It remains the ever-growing and never-ending challenge on both sides of the Atlantic to realize this and to make it understood to decision-makers, intellectuals, businessmen and the people in general.